

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Exodus 33:12-23

^{33:12} Moses said to the LORD, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' ¹³ Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." ¹⁴ He said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." ¹⁵ And he said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. ¹⁶ For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth." ¹⁷ The LORD said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." ¹⁸ Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray." ¹⁹ And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰ But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." ²¹ And the LORD continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²² and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³ then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

Commentary

Today's Old Testament lection continues the story of Moses following his return from the presence of YHWH on Sinai. Moses returned to the camp to find the people running wild (32:25). Enraged by the scene of reveling before the golden calf, he smashed the stone tablets upon which the divine commandments had been written—a most fitting metaphor for the breaking of the covenant and the relationship between YHWH and the people. Chapter 33 begins with God instructing Moses and the people to "go". They were to continue on their journey to the land of promise; from now on, however, an angel would go before them—not YHWH. God knew that the rebelliousness of the people would result in their destruction along the way. The verses directly preceding this lection set the stage for Moses' ongoing role as mediator between YHWH and the people. He set up the tent of meeting outside the camp

where the pillar of cloud—the presence of God descended, and where “The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (33:11).

Reflection

What happens to a people when they start thinking of themselves as better than others? What can we learn as a nation from Israel’s experience with the golden calf and God’s response to that idolatry?

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

^{1:1} Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. ² We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹ For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Commentary

Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians, his earliest letter, is the earliest writing in the New Testament. Paul founded the church in Thessalonica, capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, after leaving Philippi. The letter is addressed to the Gentile believers converted from pagan faiths. One of the letter’s primary concerns is Paul’s thanksgiving for and encouragement of the Thessalonians, who held firmly to their faith in spite of persecution and adversity. The Gentile Christians faced ongoing pressure, and often threat of physical violence, to return to the beliefs and values of the prevailing culture.

Reflection

What impact does our faith have on those around us? Do others see evidence of a living, joyous faith in us?

Matthew 22:15-22

^{22:15} Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶ So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" ²¹ They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." ²² When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Commentary

Today's Gospel lection sets a familiar scene: the Pharisees conspiring to trap Jesus by asking him a trick question. He responded, as was his habit, by turning the question back to them. His subsequent comment, though, is the best-known verse in this passage: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's". Taken out of context, this pronouncement of Jesus is often cited in debates over the relationship of church and state. At the heart of the lection, however, lies the truth that ultimately our allegiance belongs to God. God's "due" was the complete devotion of the believer. Those listening would have to decide for themselves where their ultimate loyalty lay.

Reflection

Believers bear the image of the Divine; believers belong wholly to God. Does this awareness influence the decisions you make in the political and social realms?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 99

^{99:1} The LORD is king; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!

² The LORD is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples.

³ Let them praise your great and awesome name. Holy is he!

⁴ Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.

⁵ Extol the LORD our God; worship at his footstool. Holy is he!

⁶ Moses and Aaron were among his priests, Samuel also was among those who called on his name. They cried to the LORD, and he answered them.

⁷ He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud; they kept his decrees, and the statutes that he gave them.

⁸ O LORD our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings.

⁹ Extol the LORD our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the LORD our God is holy.

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.